THE UNIQUE WILDLIFE OF WAKULLA SPRINGS
OR
THREE RIVERS BOUNDED BY HUMAN FRAILTIES

By Tom Morrill
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Oct. 11, 1971, His 50th Birthday

Photo by Sandy Shartzer

"mounds of dredged sand whose only plant cover was a variety of rank weed that grows on denuded vacant lots and construction sites in South Florida, proof the original river banks have been destroyed."

Caption from letter, "Doubts Ball,"

TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT, Oct. 6, 1971, by Sandy Shartzer

Price $1, proceeds to the Free Wakulla Springs Fund

Mr. Ball has created one of the finest wildlife sanctuaries, acre for acre, that exists in our country. . . And as a consequence I know of no similar area where the indigenous wildlife is more abundant. The establishment of this great Wakulla Springs Sanctuary solely by Mr. Ball. . .
Carl Buchheister, President Emeritus, National Audubon Society, TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT, Nov. 22, 1969.

Our party was particularly impressed with the many species and numbers of wildlife finding protection and sustenance in the Ed Ball Wildlife Refuge sanctuary. Surely this effort to preserve native wildlife and habitat should be emulated throughout the Wakulla River course. The Refuge, securely fenced and frequently patrolled, has provided safety for the wild creatures seen in other areas of the river.
Thomas W. Richards, President, The Nature Conservancy, Arlington, Va. DEMOCRAT, Sept. 26, 1971.

THREE RIVERS BOUNDED BY HUMAN FRAILTIES

The chief argument supporting Ed Ball's control of the waters of Wakulla Springs, and the Wakulla River's first four miles, is that animals are found there as nowhere else, and that these animals occur because Ball prevents poaching.

Wildlife-meaning-animals is indeed abundant and varied at Wakulla. Whether it is there because of Ed Ball is the subject of this report. I will not examine wildlife-meaning-plants, or spring and river as natural scene and habitat, except to note the following:

1) In the past two-and-a-half years, Wakulla Springs and River have suffered extensive dynamiting and dredging.

2) Litter: Swimming and boat riding structures spoil the naturalness and peace of the water area to two-hundred feet below the spring. Attracted by pay-swimming, boat-riding facilities, customers swarm the upper Wakulla June to September, and on many week-ends at other times. In addition, an eight-foot-high, chainlink fence separates spring from woods; a turnstile gives onto the beach. The spring itself is littered with coins dropped from pay boats.

3) Plants: Large, old cypresses including probably the largest, oldest in the "sanctuary" (photo, FLA. OBSERVER, Nov. 6, 1969) were dynamited. Half the trees and all undergrowth in one-hundred-twenty acres of woods around the spring have been bulldozed. Thus

POACHING ON THE WAKULLA RIVER IN THE OVER-ALL SENSE OF CONSUMPTION OF NATURE HAS BEEN FAR GREATER INSIDE BALL'S FENCE THAN OUT.

Our main discussion, then, is really on a secondary matter obscuring the issue of poaching vs. protection over-all. We consider first: Is Wakulla Springs indeed unique for wildlife-meaning-animals? Is there in fact a paucity of animals on nearby, unfenced rivers? Do fewer animals on the lower Wakulla River show effectiveness of Ball's fence and deputies against a despoiling public?

I

For the past six years I have owned a cabin on the basin of the St. Marks River, the Wakulla's eastern "Siamese twin." In this time I have spent a total of over one-hundred-fifty days on and around that portion of the St. Marks which rises ten miles southeast of Tallahassee, a mile below Natural Bridge.

On the St. Marks basin, a half-mile, three-hundred foot wide, stretch south of the rise, I have several times seen all the day herons it is possible to see in this part of Florida, seven species. Supposed by many people to occur only at Wakulla Springs, Limpkins are readily heard and seen on the basin. White Ibis are frequent. Ospreys nest there; in 1971 two nests brought off a total of five young. Anhingas and Cormorants are seen there almost every day. In six years of birding within walking and canoeing distance of the basin, I have observed 176 species.

The next river east of the St. Marks, as the St. Marks is east of the Wakulla, is the Wacissa. Another observer and I on Aug. 18, 1971, recorded the following herons in a one-mile run comparable to the Wakulla "jungle cruise": Cattle Egret, 30; Little Blue, 16; Green, 15; American, 2; Snowy, 2; Louisiana, 4; Great Blue, 2; Yellow Crowned, 1. We also saw 18 Limpkins, 10 Wood Stork, and 14 White Ibis. Teal, Wood Duck, Osprey, and Anhinga were in the same area. On Sept. 8, 1971, other observers and I recorded most of these species and raised a flock of thirty-five Bluewing Teal.

THUS, IN COMPARABLE AREAS, THE SAME OR GREATER ABUNDANCE AND VARIETY OF SPECIES IS PRESENT ON THE TWO FREE, OPEN RIVERS WITHIN TWENTY MILES OF THE WAKULLA AS CAN BE SEEN FROM WAKULLA'S $2.00 BOAT RIDE.

Not only is the total number of birds on the St. Marks and Wacissa comparable with the Wakulla – THE MANY MORE BIRDS ABOVE THE WAKULLA FENCE IS MATCHED ON THE UNFENCED ST. MARKS AND WACISSA. Two to three times as many wading birds and ducks occur on the St. Marks basin, and in the Wacissa's northern two miles, as in the whole rest of these rivers.

It is true man's works and presence restricts wildlife on the St. Marks and Wacissa as on the Wakulla. Considering the St. Marks down to Newport, that river and the Wacissa taken together are about equally developed as the Wakulla. Since "Silver Springs" development started at Wakulla in the summer of 1969, there have been fewer birds. Habitat has been taken, people have crowded out birds. Similarly Silver Springs (Ball calls his owning company "The Wakulla Silver Springs Company"), once a paradise for birds and alligators, is now a refuge for cash register birds instead.

Despite man's interference, animal life is greatest in upper portions of each of these rivers. Why?

First, wading birds have numbers limited by factors other than capacity of rivers to feed them. Herons can nest in very few places; most herons inhabiting our rivers breed on offshore islands. As I know from personal observation, such islands giving freedom from predators and brush for nesting are carrying full capacity. Thus herons need and use only a small portion of river habitat, concentrating where it is optimal.

Best habitat on the three rivers is where they come from the ground. Traveling underground in limerock, these streams emerge where limestone is close to the surface. Around rises or springs on limestone flats, the three rivers spread out. Shallows, "edgy" and "islandy," are best for plants and animals.

Another factor which I have not checked with tests, though springs' blue color is an indication, may be chemical. As sea waters welling from depths are richest because of decay matter brought up from ocean floors, these rivers are probably richest in dissolved salts, and nitrogen, potassium, and phosphorus, near their sources.

Plants and animals are most abundant in the three rivers' upper reaches where, as at the ocean shore, water is shallow, and also, as in the sea, where there are upwelling nutrients.

We have talked of wildlife as wading birds. What of Wakulla's alligators?

The Okefenokee Swamp has as large number and larger size 'gators in certain parts; so does the St. Marks Refuge. Old Joe, embalmed like Lenin in Ball's House of Horrors against

poachers, was killed in 1966, long after the fence went up. That fence probably provoked the old 'gator's death more than prevented it.

Ball has much 'gator habitat in his million-acre empire. It is likely some of Wakulla's 'gators are imports from elsewhere by Ball employees, or, by Fish and Game "boys" whose boss is on Ball's wildlife foundation.

After trading in 'gator hides was finally made illegal, the big water lizards are rapidly increasing. In the past year they are coming up in yards bordering Lake Jackson; three or four now live in Lake Hall. For the first time in six years, this year I have seen 'gators in the St. Marks, and one in the main Wacissa.

What of that awesome flock of paddlers and dabblers most people think of when they think Ball is protecting wildlife?

Ball baits the spring in winter, having hundreds of pounds of corn a day scattered on the edge and in the water. He does the same at his Southwood Farm where, according to the FLORIDIAN, May 5, 1968, this wildlife hog collected 98% of all Florida's Canada Geese by feeding twenty tons annually!

Beside depriving other areas of ducks, preempting other opportunities for observation by wildlife enthusiasts, the Springs' massive feed dumping tames creatures supposed to be wild. Wildlife is thus destroyed, not preserved.

Not only does feeding in a small, human-surrounded arena make ducks vulnerable to hunting on migration; zest for foraging, and behavior for foraging, is impaired on the breeding grounds.

Nor are our other rivers barren of ducks, through hunting is considerable on them, and there is no artificial feeding. The St. Marks basin has an annual flock of one to two-hundred Widgeon, at least half as many as at the Springs. This flock is not noticeably diminished after the hunting season. Bluewing Teal, Gadwall, Shovelers, and Lesser Scaup, also appear each year on the St. Marks. Common the year around are Wood Duck. As noted above, this beautiful bird and Teal are common on the Wacissa.

Finally, one questions the effects such large-scale fertilization has on the quality of Wakulla's waters.

II

Obviously Ball asserts powerful negative as well as positive inducements to take his side. Most people in Wakulla and Leon Counties are too afraid of him to openly oppose him. Most people today anywhere are conformists, accepting whatever men or interests are in power with little objectivity or complaint. Aware their world is ecologically-crisised, people don't take steps against nature's exploiters, including themselves, so much as they look for someone else to care for ecology for them. In absence of belief in God, people find it necessary to believe in Ball.

"The most powerful man in Florida" does indeed use his power to get what he wants, as anyone can learn for himself by reading the 1965 Congressional Record, House Committee on Banking and Currency Hearing on H.R. 7371, pgs. 130-1. This Record contains the strongest possible evidence, short of Ball's confession, that he paid off a judge in winning a crucial suit.

Within a week after the filing of the fence case, I received a phone call from Mrs. Sharon Davis, Florida representative of the National Nature Conservancy. She said: "Ball is helping us save a river. I'm going to ask you to do one of two things, resign from the board of the Florida Conservancy, or drop your suit."

This "saving a river" story is similar to one used against me by the local Audubon chapter president in 1969. I was said to have "hurt conservation" because Ball was about to give Florida Audubon $50,000 when I protested his dredging. Florida Audubon's executive director

wrote me no such gift was ever in the works, and under the circumstances money would be refused if offered.

After I told Mrs. Davis I would neither resign nor drop the suit, the National Conservancy pressured its Florida Chapter to expell me for using my membership in an official way to fight Ball. When no evidence was presented, the executive committee refused NNC's demand. A week later, NNC's president himself used the Conservancy in as official a way as it can be used, signing his DEMOCRAT letter, "President, The Nature Conservancy."

A week after that I received a letter from the Florida Chapter president. Demonstrating Richards' and his dishonesty in the Springs' intervention, he stated Wakulla was already dredged beyond hope; the real hope was getting land out of Ball. (National Audubon was similarly "suckered." Ball hired NAS's president, who made the deal for the Society to enter the Springs, as president of his Ball Wildlife Foundation as soon as he – Buchheister – retired from NAS.)

Richards' letter was the third of three in the DEMOCRAT in a week, all from out-of-towners, all after "recently visiting the Springs." No letters had appeared against Ball at the time of Richards' letter, five in all for him, plus a column by the editor.

This not only reflects the mediocrity of DEMOCRAT readers and letter writers. It also shows Ball's power to elicit and control news. These DEMOCRAT pleas that Ball is protecting wildlife in the face of easily observed evidence to the contrary also reflects our modern, efete and commercialized, world.

Most people never see wild birds larger than sparrows. Furthermore, they want the comforting feeling of paying to see "wildlife" while being carried around passively, having themselves and the wildlife confined and fenced from each other. Of course none of these earnest letter and column writers says anything about saving wildlife in adjacent rivers, though the Wacissa "Wild River" proposal urgently needs support.

Everyone feels awed, even now, seeing Wakulla Springs the first time, as one does seeing the St. Marks basin, or the Wacissa. One wants to thank someone or something, to beg pardon for spoiling such grandeur with one's presence. Signs everywhere tell us who to be grateful to at Wakulla Springs. In that grand setting, even with the spoliation, unless people are capable of extraordinary judgment and observation for themselves, they will praise Ball. Smelling money or position, they gush like the spring itself.

The WAKULLA NEWS of Sept. 2, 1971, reported that at a County Chamber of Commerce meeting the consensus was for keeping the fence "to protect and preserve the wildlife within the boundries of the springs." Needless to say, the C. of C. has had no other record of caring for wildlife. The reverse is the case: The Wakulla C. of C. was a prime opponent keeping from adoption the Ochlockonee Bay Aquatic Preserve. (Ball also opposed this and other Preserves adjoining his lands. The head of the Wakulla County Commissioners, a Ball employee, has been a leading opponent of the Preserve and also of the St. Marks Refuge Wilderness.) Members who had long cursed the fence, swearing they would tear it down with their bare hands at the first opportunity, reversed themselves when there was actually a chance through the courts.

Beside fear of Ball, C. of C. members probably support Ball's fence because he is exploiting the Springs for profit. If he were really saving wildlife, the C. of C. would likely oppose him regardless of business or personal pressures. The profit motive involving rapeable nature is far more important in our general culture than clean air and water, decent living space and wildlife.

In summary, solid psychological and cultural reasons explain the common assertion that Ball is protecting (or creating) wildlife at Wakulla Springs. These reasons have nothing to do with wildlife. Not only is Wakulla's wildlife more destroyed than preserved because of protection afforded Ball by the fence – he has not needed dredging permits and is tax-exempt – comparable rivers within twenty miles protected by laws and law officers, and also by today's free people, traveling freely on state-sovereign waters, have similar or superior wildlife.

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